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AUTHOR Hall, Ross D.
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ABSTRACT

The desirability of early foreign language (FL) pronunciation is discussed from organizational, psychological and social points of view. Gaining early mastery of the FL sound inventory (starting with the "dramatic items") allows beginning students to quickly enjoy significant initial successes of a very personal nature which also enable the teacher to establish and maintain a supportive momentum at a stage of FL learning often held lacking in intrinsic value. In the adventure of self-extension that constitutes FL study, the experience of confronting the "foreign" and making it a part of one's individual behavior is a valuable part of the elementary FL course where our student constituency is greatest. Students should feel that precisely in the delicate matter of "how one sounds," a distinct expertise has been reached even in the first few weeks of study. Specific recommendations are made concerning teacher preparation, selection and sequencing of target sounds for greatest learning impact and some effective practical teaching procedures. (Author)

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Foreign Language Pronunciation on the Elementary Level: A Neglected Area of Early Expertise

Ross D. Hall
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

One of the persistent problems facing our profession is the opinion held by many that nothing intrinsically significant is accomplished in courses representing the early stages of foreign language (FL) study where we find most of our students. Not a few of us feel that a student's extended labors with our subject become fruitful only when the reading and discussion of literature begin; the initial semesters or years of grammar study and structured speaking practice merely anticipate this and are something to be passed through as quickly as possible. It is important that we recognize the primary stage of FL study for what it does provide, and which I would characterize in part as follows: this stage constitutes an area of formal learning in which the learner encounters the "different" and makes it part of him or herself. The very adventure of self-extension that is involved in FL study is an experience of fundamental psychological and cultural significance leading to increased appreciation of human attitudes and values. The acquisition of FL pronunciation is of profound relevance to this type of learning.

A person's command of a FL tends to be judged by the general public (which supplies our students) on how that person sounds, not merely on how much he or she says. The better the sound, the stronger the impression given of successful learning--and teaching. We tend to feel that a person has attained a measure of definitive competence in the language if he or she sounds like a native speaker, even if the vocabulary or stylistic control is still relatively meager. Moreover, our estimate of that person as such is high because in our native languages we invariably make fundamental value judgements about people based on our impressions of their speech. The irony here is that nobody generally expects the average FL learner to sound anything like a native speaker before reaching an advanced level of instruction (if ever) or before having lived abroad for a time. FL pronunciation acceptable to a native speaker is all too often treated as a matter of ultimate expertise despite its importance to the self-conception of the learner and to the assessment that others will make of his or her general success during the course of FL learning.

We as teachers can counter such misconceptions by recognizing that the early learning of accurate pronunciation is an undertaking in which significant personal accomplishments can be made and recognized from the very first week of an elementary FL class. The most obvious benefit is that students receive an immediate meaningful return on their investment of time and effort in the elementary FL course. Tangible gains of major value and lasting utility, usually

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left to later courses (or to "talented" students), are made at a time when much of the learning seemingly leads only to the next unit of the textbook. This is a positive contradiction of the general expectation. It is impressive in the public eye, and the teacher who makes his or her class aware of it can improve the momentum of instruction and increase the amount of individual satisfaction students will derive from achieving recognized expertise in a meaningful aspect of FL behavior from the outset. In starkly practical terms their gain can be interpreted thus: however much or little they ultimately learn to say in the FL, they will have the satisfaction--and the confidence it produces-- of knowing that what is said sounds well even on the elementary level.

The programmatic advantages of such early training become still more apparent when one considers what the latter means in purely personal terms. Language is a device of great sophistication whose functions include exposing many basic attributes of its speakers. Already as children we came to appreciate its visceral utility and its contribution to our self-conception and the opinions we form of others. Our beginning FL students find themselves behaving linguistically in a fashion which they have long since outgrown in their native tongue, and the psychologically threatening aspects of verbal confrontation with the FL can be greatly lessened if realistic pronunciation is made a part of the overall learning task. A good feeling about how one sounds can help to stimulate overall self-confidence in the face of the challenges implicit in FL classroom recitation. Venturing an utterance can then be far less harrowing when a student is secure in the knowledge that <u>whatever</u> he or she says will in any event sound acceptable, regardless of grammatical and lexical uncertainties. Similarly, to praise an indivivual's use of language is to deliver a genuine personal compliment, and a teacher who can indirectly support and encourage students by praising their good pronunciation while helping them to improve their grammatical control makes use of a strong motivational weapon. Whatever else goes wrong with a student's effort to speak, the early attainment of good pronunciation habits provides a basis for supportive recognition from the teacher that will help to provide continued incentives for later learning. In the case of beginning students who may doubt their ability to do FL work, this area of initial success can serve a distinctly therapeutic purpose.

All this is not to suggest, however, that the benefits of early pronunciation learning are of a purely psychological nature. Whatever else FL learning is, it is in any event a unique personal adventure in the awareness, extension and changing of social roles. And the adventure of sounding radically, fundamentally different from the way one usually does (and probably always will) involves the broadening experience of taking a behavioral and cultural value we perceive of as "foreign" (with all that the word connotes), learning about it, developing a familiarity with it, and finally coming to treat it as an aspect of our natural behavior. In this regard,

the learning of FL pronunciation is a simulation game in cultural tolerance in one of its most sensitive manifestations, and the game is played anew as each sound is mastered. Gradually the awareness is gained that the foreign is not necessarily strange, threatening, or merely unattractive, but that a certain communality does indeed underlie the various articulatory styles which constitute pronunciations and that a relationship of relativity exists among them.

Once the threat implicit in role-switching is overcome, students can begin to enjoy the activity of changing their identities as they move back and forth between their native and FL pronunciations. They can come to realize that their new skill is not simply a selective detail used on occasion, but an extension of their basic communicative capacity. The facility becomes a part of their personal flair and they develop a vicarious pleasure in becoming someone else for a time, returning at will to their native selves. Such enjoyment can help lead in some instances to an almost arrogant self-confidence, but in general to a high achievement level and the desire to continue with such a gratifying learning activity.

Let us digress for a moment to briefly consider our students as inheritors of the cultural values and prejudices that have developed over the past centuries of our history. What do they possibly gain in this capacity from attention paid to FL pronunciation? One answer is well worth noting: when we compare the widespread feeling that sounding "foreign" implies a lack of complete American identity ("he talks like he just got off the boat") with the need for cross-cultural understanding within and beyond our borders, the insights to be acquired through the experience of learning a foreign pronunciation seem well worth the effort of that experience itself. Since our profession has the means by which we can provide such insights, we in this country must do so within those first two years or semesters when we reach the largest number of students.

Having first discussed the value of gaining phonetic expertise in the early months of FL instruction, what can we now say concerning the teaching procedures involved? Any recommendations in this regard should certainly include the following:

1. The teacher must himself control the FL pronunciation and have some knowledge of how speech sounds are made.

2. It is not necessary in the elementary course to proceed step by step through the series and orders or the distinctive features of the entire FL sound system; rather, the teacher should concentrate on those cases of most glaring phonetic contrast with the learners' native language, since these are the objectionable

features of the native-language accent.

3. The sequence of sounds to be mastered should be coordinated with textbook contents so that each target sound is amply represented in the vocabulary of the units with which it is introduced and initially practiced.

4. No correlation should be expected between the subjective importance of the FL target sounds and their importance within the FL phonological system, nor with FL phoneme occurrence frequency. What matters most is the feeling of rapid and substantive progress given to students through the early control of the FL sounds--the dramatic cases should come first. For example, this writer concentrated initially on the consonants /c x l r/ following an introductory survey of the Standard German phoneme inventory, the actual sequence being determined by the phonological makeup of the early units in our text (Feld-Schumann-von Nardroff: Anfang und Fortschritt). Sounds to be learned later on were also given advance attention.

5. Characteristics of the students' native dialects may influence the sequencing of target sounds; German /ü:/ and /ai/ rate attention in North Carolina far sooner than in New Jersey.

6. Careful attention should be paid to the FL articulation basis. This we have found to be surprisingly well worth the effort, as the care taken with high-priority sounds against a proper articulatory background aids the learning of less "crucial" sounds as well, and many phonetic details can be mastered without the need for separate attention. To cite one instance: dental stop articwas not included among our first-year goals, but as a consequence of stressing the relatively greater degree of muscular tension characteristic of Standard German phonation, our students started producing aspirated /t/ intervocalically and word-finally, replacing the American English flap and non-release in those positions. We thus found ourselves killing relatively many birds with relatively few stones.

7. Ample use of mnemonic devices, rules of thumb and articulatory directions is most directly effective in teaching the target sounds, with minimal pair examples serving for illustration and remedial purposes. Overpronunciation is also a quite useful technique in the early phases of phonetic work.

8. While FL target sounds may be surveyed together for introductory purposes at the start of the course (cf. above), at least two weeks of daily attention to each such sound--or pair thereof--must be allowed to ensure adequate functional familiarity before further sounds are presented for regular practice.

Crucial to the entire enterprise is the teacher's attitude. The class must be made aware of the importance of early pronunciation learning and its attendant benefits. The development of authentic speech habits should be among the formal learning goals of the course, and the successful mastery of at least the major target sounds should accordingly be reflected in the course grade. The students may be wary at first, willingly cooperating for the first two weeks, then falling back in the expectation that the teacher's rigor will wane after the initial excitement. Continued phonetic exercise during class warm-up time and continued clear signals of the teacher's expectations will bring the class to realize that this is indeed something worth working on and not just an individual quirk of their instructor's style. Only later will they feel the cumulative effect of their efforts as they notice the heightened incentive given by the awareness of the good speech habits they have already developed and can now implement with little effort. They then know that they sound genuinely (and impressively) legitimate, that they have a style of spoken performance which they are not ashamed to display. This writer's students have also been quite proud to have collectively given the lie to the assumption that this sort of accomplishment cannot be made or is not worth making on the elementary level.

One final thought. The early learning of accurate FL pronunciation is beyond the capacity of no ordinary student. Nobody wants to sound strangely in front of others, and each learner will require the constant support and encouragement of the teacher who is in effect asking him or her to expose a sensitive facet of personal identity. Some students will need particularly strong encouragement if their progress is slow for a time, but all should realize that they are being directed toward a positive and valuable goal, an accomplishment of which they can be rightly proud, and a desirable type of personal behavior that by virtue of its very nature as a motor skill will lend a fully appropriate character to any utterance they will make from now on during their FL studies. The contribution of this undertaking to their knowledge and awareness will likewise remain with them long after the several details of grammar and vocabulary have been forgotten.